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THE FAULTS OF THE EARLY CHRISTIANS AS SHOWN IN THE EPISTLE OF JAMES.

By the REVEREND E. P. BURTT,
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Jerusalem, A. D. 50-65.

The date of this letter, you observe, is quite indefinite. I have left it so purposely in order to give readers the pleasure of making a more definite assignment for themselves. My purpose in writing is to give you a brief account of a recent conversation which I was permitted to enjoy with pastor James of the church in this city. I found him at his quiet home on Synagogue Street, having just returned from a tour of visitation among the churches of Palestine.

"I had heard" said he "many unfavorable rumors about the state of things both in our country and in the Diaspora. It was reported that grave faults were becoming common among church members and the name of our blessed Lord, by which we are called, dishonored. Indeed I might have feared as much from the difficulties which I encounter in my own church. But I hoped that the reports were wrong or at least exaggerated. At last to satisfy myself I asked leave of absence from my people and, appointing myself a committee of one on the state of religion, I made a personal investigation in most of the places in this land where our countrymen have received the gospel. Not being able to spend the time required to visit the Diaspora I wrote to Peter, Andrew, Thomas, Matthew, and others, whose replies all assure me that the condition of affairs there is much the same as here. But I suppose you are anxious for me to be specific. Well," drawing his note-book (a little roll of parchment) from his pocket, "first of all I will give you a matter-of-fact list of the actual faults which I noticed or of which I secured reliable evidence: unsteadfastness, lack of wisdom, envy, blaming God, unholy zeal, hypocrisy, obsequiousness, formalism, foolish am-

bitions, recriminations, angry words, jealousy, faction, lust, worldliness, pride, love of money, disregard of Providence, impatience at our Lord's delay, swearing."

"Why," said I, "is it possible?"

"I do not wonder," continued James, "that you are astonished. It is a sad picture. However, in justice this ought to be said, We are looking at the dark side. The other side we have not even glanced at. You must remember that many churches are not affected at all, while in others only a few members are guilty of these things. You know how even one unspiritual member, who has really given himself to the flesh, may illustrate nearly all these faults. Take the case of the church at Jericho for example. There is one man down there who gives pastor Zaccheus a world of trouble. The probability is that he was never converted. He joined the church after all persecution had ceased and has been nothing but a reproach ever since. So it is in other places. A few bring into disgrace the whole church. Still I grant that the state of things is bad, and the outlook is still worse unless something can be done to check these evils."

"But how do you account for the presence of these faults so soon in our churches?" said I.

"I suppose," he answered, "that there are several reasons. One of the very first that suggests itself to our minds is historical. Such times as we have experienced for many years past are sure to have a bad influence upon the life of the church. The first few years after our Lord's death, you remember, were years of persecution at the hands of our countrymen. That was a time of great spiritual power. Christians were tested, driven to prayer and only those whose hearts were on fire with love for the Master maintained their ground. We had little difficulty about the faults of church members then. Since that time we have been free from persecution except in one or two brief periods like that under Herod in 44. But this fact though favorable to the rapid increase of numbers has been in many ways decidedly unfavorable in its effect upon church life."

"How do you mean?" said I.

"I mean, in the first place, by opening the doors to uninspir-

itual members. In the absence of any great test like that which persecution gives many mistakes are apt to occur. Some are attracted by the freedom of the new faith as opposed to the bondage of the old law. Others, inclined to magic, are carried away by the astonishing displays of the Holy Spirit. Still others, dissatisfied with the waning hopes of our nation, choose the new belief as a last resort, transferring to it all their foolish earthly hopes. So much for that point.

"Then the effect of these last years has been bad in another way. It has been a time of great discouragement. Political troubles have been frequent. Change has followed change, ruler has succeeded ruler. There have been famines, uprisings as in Caesarea and Samaria, wholesale robberies and oppressions. Such times of uncertainty and injustice are peculiarly hard for the poor, and most of our members, you know, are of that class. Rulers grind us with taxes. Rich men refuse us our wages. These and not persecutions are the terrible 'temptations' of this day."

"What effect has this had upon our churches?" I asked.

"Just what you might expect. People do not endure these trials and consequently we find many sad cases of unsteadfastness (1:2-4). Then there is a lack of wisdom and faith even among the steadfast ones. Times like these demand peculiar wisdom in all affairs of life,—in business, in family life, in church affairs. People are easily distracted and forget that there is abundant wisdom above us only waiting for our call (1:5-8). You can see, also, how under such circumstances the poor will easily fall into the sin of envy. Embittered by their own distresses they look with covetous eyes upon the possessions of their more favored neighbors, forgetting that they themselves are the truly rich, being heirs to a "high estate" (1:9-11). Under the weakening power, too, of these outward trials many gradually find themselves falling into sin through inward temptations, and in the darkness which then follows have bitter thoughts of God, attributing all temptations to him and thus justifying themselves for yielding to sins which they cannot (or think they cannot) resist" (1:12-18).

"But don't you think that hereditary tendencies have something to do in explaining the evils in the church?" said I.

"Doubtless. There is one Jewish tendency which has had a marked effect: viz., formalism. I find its hateful presence everywhere. Since persecution ceased the transition from Judaism to Christianity has been too easy. Many have merely grafted the new faith on the old religion and the graft does not thrive very well. I found churches bitterly troubled in this way. One of the first things you notice in such places is the passionate zeal which is employed on behalf of religion, a zeal altogether too impure and abominable to work the righteousness of God. It is the old Pharisaic partisanship in a new dress (1:19-21). And underneath it of course is the old, sad hypocrisy, the double life. The outward requirements of the new faith are scrupulously obeyed, as were those of the old; but when off duty the heart indulges in all sorts of evil. Religion with such people is a mere show. High sounding music, elaborate rituals, costly robes, formal prayers,—these are about the whole of it. Rich men are slavishly honored and their riches coveted for the church while the poor man is thrust aside no matter how good he may be. It is pitiable, is it not? Think of churches where such a spirit prevails! How utterly dead and unspiritual! They need a sharp message" (1:22-2:26).

"It is bad enough," I answered, "and there is more to follow, for you have not yet finished the list of faults which you said you found among the churches."

"So there is more to follow, indeed: foolish ambitions, angry words, jealousy, faction, lust, worldliness, pride, love of money, disregard of Providence, impatience at our Lord's delay, swearing. Some of these, I suppose, are to be explained partly by local causes. I notice that churches situated in educational centres in this country, and also churches in the Diaspora which have met Eastern or Western culture, are assailed by one bad temptation; viz., to exalt unduly the *charism* of teaching above all other gifts of the Holy Spirit. Every little man sets himself up as a teacher. Not yet, indeed, has Oriental gnosticism nor Western philosophy invaded our churches to produce divisions over doctri-

nal questions, but this foolish ambition to teach makes trouble over every conceivable matter. Every question, great or small, is made the subject of discussion,—for example, the question of caring for the widows, the poor and the sick, the election of officers, the duties of officers, methods of church work, management of meetings, and so on endlessly. Indeed, the smaller the question, oftentimes the greater the dispute, because the discussion lacks the gravity which a matter of importance would give it. So it sometimes happens that very sad results appear. When the tongue really runs loose, you can imagine how terrible its work is (3:1-12)! Then bitter envy and strife are apt to follow which show only too clearly that this wisdom which sets itself up to teach is not from above, but is earthly, carnal, demoniacal (3:13-18).

“In some places, as Damascus, Babylon, the churches are surrounded by the fascinations of worldly pleasure. Of course such tendencies are not confined to these special places, but I name them as representative. Oh! for a little persecution again! How quickly would it weed out these worldly members! So bad is this evil in some cases, that even prayer is a mockery. People ask things from God which they purpose to use in sinful pleasure. Horrible! Here also is a fruitful source of pride, envy, hypocrisy, backbiting and numerous other evils (4:1-12).

“Then there are other places, like Joppa down here, and Tyre and Alexandria, where there is a terrible temptation of still another kind. The life of those places is trade. So there is born a passion for gain. Every boy grows up a trader. The little urchins on the street play ‘store’ every day. The church at Joppa sadly illustrates this evil. They disregard Providence in their plans, and when reproved repeat the offence, and even boast that they came out all right (4:13-17).

This feverish desire for gain is increased in some by their old ideas of the earthly nature of the Messiah’s kingdom. They look for great wealth to fall to each of the followers of Christ when he shall come to conquer all enemies and distribute the kingdoms and riches of this world among his people. Some of them, therefore, do not scruple to help themselves in advance.

But how foolish for them to copy the rich men of the world, who are hastening to a terrible judgment" (5:1-6)!

"I believe you spoke also of impatience at our Lord's delay, did you not?"

"Yes, that is a prevalent fault. I fear we shall all have to plead guilty to that charge. Our Lord's words seemed to assure us of his speedy coming, and many of the events He predicted as preceding his coming have already come to pass. Impostors, proclaiming themselves to be the Messiah, have appeared. We have heard of wars in the West and the East. The great famine of 46 is one thing he evidently must have meant when he spoke of famines. For several years after his death his disciples were brought before councils and suffered imprisonment and even death for his sake. Certainly, also, iniquity has prevailed and the love of many has waxed cold. All these signs, to speak of no more, have been fulfilled. Then the condition of the times has been so bad, that many faint under burdens which seem to promise no relief until Jesus shall come to right these wrongs. I suppose one reason, too, for this impatience is the influence of tradition. You know how, for one hundred years back, our nation has been on tip-toe looking for the Messiah. Among Christians, now that Jesus has come, this feeling is transferred to the promise of his second coming. (5:7-11).

Speaking of traditional influence reminds me of the last fault in our list, viz., swearing. The effect of centuries of false teaching on the subject of oaths cannot be undone in a moment. Conscience is perverted, judgment is obtuse. Christians make sophistical distinctions between oaths, calling some right and others wrong. Yet how plainly our Lord taught us on this point; 'Swear not at all, neither by the heaven, for it is the throne of God, nor by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet' (5:12).

These are the chief faults which I have noticed among our churches, but explain them as we will, the saddest fact of all is the fact of their existence."

"Cannot something be done to correct these things?" asked I.

"I wish there might be," he said. "I have pondered over it much and sometimes I feel strongly impelled to send a letter to

all the churches, denouncing such evils and entreating the faithful to greater endurance and a more spiritual life. What would you think of it?"

"The very thing to do. I do believe the Holy Spirit has suggested the plan to your mind, and may the same blessed Spirit prepare the hearts of the people for the message!" answered I, rising to go.

Such was the substance of our conversation. If James concludes to write his letter I will send you copies later, that you may use them to check any similar evils which may be developing in your country.

Yours in the faith.

PHILIP.